



# TRACES OF PREHISTORIC HUMAN ACTIVITY AND AGRICULTURAL FINDINGS IN CHITRAKOOT REGION

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## Abstract:

*Chitrakoot region, geographically, situated along the northern margins of the Vindhyan plateau, occupies a strategic ecological and cultural position for understanding prehistoric human adaptation and the development of early agricultural practices. Archaeological surveys and limited excavations in the region have yielded evidence of sustained human occupation from the Mesolithic through the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods. Rock-shelter sites with paintings, microlithic industries, ground-stone tools, habitation deposits, and early ceramic remains reflect gradual transformations in subsistence and settlement behaviour. Implements such as querns, grinding slabs, and polished stone tools indicate increasing dependence on plant processing activities, suggesting the emergence of cultivation alongside hunting and pastoral pursuits. Although direct archaeobotanical data from Chitrakoot are presently limited, comparative evidence from adjacent river valleys with similar environmental settings supports the likelihood of early cereal and pulse cultivation in the region. The archaeological record points towards a mixed subsistence economy marked by continuity as well as innovation, rather than a sudden shift to agriculture. This study highlights the significance of Chitrakoot as a transitional prehistoric landscape and contributes to broader debates on agricultural origins in north-central India.*

**Keywords:** Archaeology; Prehistoric human; Chitrakoot; Vindhyan plateau; Stone tools; Agriculture; Rock paintings

## I. Introduction:

Chitrakoot (Lat. 24° 48' to 25° 12' N and Long. 80° 58' to 81° 34' E) holds a strategic and archaeologically vital position within the Northern Vindhyan region of the Indian subcontinent. Geographically, the district is situated where the states of Northern Madhya Pradesh and Southern Uttar Pradesh converge, placing it firmly within the Kaimur hill range and the wider Vindhyan basin.<sup>1</sup> This geological setting, characterized by numerous rock shelters and river valleys, has long been recognized for containing rich prehistoric cultural assemblages, dating back to the Palaeolithic era.<sup>2</sup> The area's geological structure, dominated by sandstone and quartzite formations, facilitated the preservation of both lithic artifacts and extensive parietal art, contributing to its profound archaeological potential. Early explorations in this vicinity, conducted by pioneers such as Cockburn and Carlleyle in the late 19th century, first documented painted rock shelters and prehistoric materials across the Kaimur, Banda, and Sigravli basins.<sup>3</sup> Discoveries at Chitrakoot sites, including Siddhpur and Mau, contribute directly to this tradition, revealing

rock paintings that span the entirety of the cultural spectrum from the Prehistoric to the Historic periods, alongside Palaeolithic and Mesolithic tools.<sup>4</sup> The rock paintings of the Northern Vindhyas, including those documented in Chitrakoot, represent a complex, chronological palimpsest. This stratigraphy allows researchers to trace the shift in human habitation and subsistence patterns from highly mobile foraging groups to specialized, settled agrarian societies. The established framework classifies this art into periods corresponding to changes in economy, style, and thematic content.

The name 'Chitrakoot' itself carries archaeological significance, translating literally as "mountain (koot) where pictures (chitra) are appear".<sup>5</sup> This linguistic evidence suggests that, unlike some prehistoric sites that were only recently rediscovered by colonial and modern archaeologists, the presence and location of the art shelters were integral to the indigenous place-name tradition and communal knowledge. This interpretation positions the rock art not merely as static prehistoric relics but as a dynamic component of an indigenous historical tradition. The paintings thus function as a localized, persistent repository of the group's historical memory, utilizing the rock face as a continually updated visual chronicle. The density of these cultural assets, along with exotic waterfalls, caves, and wildlife sanctuaries, has led to the region being identified as a potential UNESCO Global Geopark, formally acknowledging the global value of this immense heritage.<sup>6</sup>

## II. The Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Foundation (Hunter-Gatherer Societies):

The most extensive and skilled activity is associated with the Mesolithic period, although Palaeolithic artifacts have also been recovered from the shelters, testifying to the deep antiquity of human presence. Tools from this foundational phase primarily document the life of forest-based hunting, gathering, and foraging nomads. Bariyari is the finest example of this which is regarded as industry site too.<sup>7</sup> Siddhapur, Bankesiddha, Ainchwara, Lodhawara, Lalapur, Lokhari, Gopipur and Nihi implements support this, firmly.<sup>8</sup>



*microlithic tools from siddhapur surface (courtesy- p. kumar, & et. al.)*

Subsequently, the earliest paintings depict humans dancing and engaging in hunting activities at various sites. The motifs of the hunt are central to the Mesolithic corpus, featuring large wild fauna such as antelopes, rhinoceros, elephants, and deer.<sup>9</sup> The human figures are typically small, schematic, and rendered as linear stick-figures, often utilizing microlith-barbed weapons like arrows and spears. Archaeological excavations within these shelters confirm the association of this art with non- or semi-geometric microliths, prepared stone-floors, and grinding stones.<sup>10</sup> The depictions of early communal dance scenes suggest organized group rituals that were vital for social cohesion and success in the difficult hunting economy of the early Holocene.<sup>11</sup>

### III. The Chalcolithic or Protohistoric Transition: The Dawn of Domesticates

The chronological framework places the Chalcolithic (or Protohistoric) transition roughly between 2500 BCE and 200 BCE, coinciding with Phase VI of the broad Bhimbetka classification. This period marks the crucial economic shift to pastorals and incipient agriculture. Analysis may be made in the following categories:

#### (i). Schematic and Stylistic Changes

The depiction in rock arts of this phase document a dramatic schematic redirection where the emphasis shifts from hunting wild animals to the life revolving around domesticated cattle.<sup>12</sup> The bovine appears ubiquitously in art panels, frequently depicted in large herds, sometimes pulling chariots and carts. The focus on herding and pastoral scenes visibly chronicles the adoption of livestock as fixed economic assets. Stylistically, the art transitions from the dynamic naturalism of the Mesolithic to more static depictions, often using silhouettes and shadowgraphs in variants of red and brown pigments.<sup>13</sup>

#### (ii). Cultural Acculturation and Economic Integration

The inhabitants of the Vindhyan rock shelters during the Chalcolithic period were not isolated. Evidence suggests they were actively engaged in exchange networks with the established agricultural communities located in the adjacent Malwa plains.<sup>14</sup> The appearance of motifs such as tunic-like dresses and certain religious symbols in the rock art indicates cultural exchange and adoption of practices from settled farming communities. This demonstrates that the local transition toward an agricultural economy was largely an acculturation process driven by trade and the integration of the upland hunter-gatherers with lowland agricultural societies. The artistic absorption of cattle and agrarian symbols serves as a visual record of their increasing interaction with, and reliance on, this broader protohistoric economy.

### IV. The Iron Age and Early Historic Period: Conflict and Complex Narratives

The subsequent phases (overlapping with the Iron Age, generally post-1000 BCE) reflect further societal complexity, marked by the introduction of iron technology and formalized socio-political structures.

The art of this era is characterized by:

**i. Warfare and Hierarchy:** There is a pronounced increase in depictions of organized conflict. Scenes frequently show men equipped with sophisticated iron-age weapons (swords and shields) and specialized transport such as horse-riders and elephants.<sup>15</sup> This schematic shift highlights the emergence of inter-group competition and the necessity of establishing a specialized warrior class to defend fixed resources like cultivated land, livestock, and trade routes.

**ii. Cognitive Advancements:** The later rock art exhibits a move toward narrative complexity, displaying 'cognitively advanced choices' in composition.<sup>16</sup> This includes the use of templates like three-dimensionality and perspective, detailed representations of dress and hairstyle, and the simulation of landscapes. These complex narrative structures suggest a shift in the function of the art, moving away from simple ritualistic or representational purposes toward the documentation of historically oriented events and identity-based differences between competing groups.

It is observed that the later art styles occasionally display a simplification, becoming geometric and schematic. This apparent artistic crudeness, when compared to the skilled Mesolithic depictions, is interpreted not as a degradation of ability, but as a change in purpose. As society specialized (including the emergence of farmers, goldsmiths, and smiths), the symbolic role of the rock art likely transitioned from being a component of immersive ritual (hunting magic) to a tool for rapid historical documentation, memorialization, and the visual assertion of group identity and historical claims, where efficiency in communication superseded detailed naturalism.<sup>17</sup>

## V. The Megalithic Affiliation in the Vindhyas: A Cognitive Link

A critical analysis is required to address the relationship between the rock paintings of Chitrakoot and the Megalithic culture, as the Vindhyas are peripheral to the core zone of megalithic architectural construction in South India.

### a. Defining the Megalithic Culture Complex and its Traits

The Megalithic culture of India is intrinsically linked to the Iron Age (typically starting around 1000 BCE).<sup>18</sup> It is defined by a characteristic material package: the construction of graves using large stones (megaliths), the widespread use of iron implements (such as sickles and plough coulters used by specialized farmers), and the presence of associated pottery like the Black-and-red Ware (BRW).<sup>19</sup> While the most extensive monumental megalithic burials (cairn-circles, dolmens) are concentrated in the Deccan plateau and South India, the Vindhyas exhibit the *ideological* and *economic* structure of this era.

### b. Shared Ideology and Symbolic Overlap

The rock art in the later phases of Chitrakoot serves as the Central Indian visual expression of Iron Age socio-political structure, despite the regional variation in burial practices. The frequent depiction of organized warfare, horses, and men wielding swords and shields in the Iron Age rock art directly corresponds to the technological advancements and resource competition that defined the Megalithic era.<sup>20</sup> The visual record indicates that the emerging settled life, sustained by iron tools and agriculture, required specialized military capacity to protect its fixed assets.

There is a demonstrated, pan-Indian cognitive tradition surrounding the symbolic use of mineral pigments. The red ochre (hematite) and white kaolin pigments used in the Vindhyan rock art are also 'invariably found associated with the burial grounds' of megalithic sites in South India.<sup>21</sup> This shared ritualistic use of colour suggests a broad ideological common ground across the subcontinent during the Iron Age. Where the Deccan region manifested ancestor veneration and historical claims through massive stone burials, the Vindhyas utilized the established tradition of parietal art. The rock paintings, particularly those depicting historical events, conflicts, or later scenes involving memorial stones, functioned as a continuous historical and ancestral record, serving the same mnemonic and identity-defining purpose as the monumental megaliths.

The cultural linkage is further clarified by contrasting the association between rock art and the Megalithic complex in Central India versus South India:

regional comparison: megalithic-rock art association in india

Region	Primary Megalithic Manifestation	Rock Art Chronology	Art-Megalithic Association	Shared Cognitive Traits
Northern Vindhyas (Chitrakoot)	Sparse/Indirect (focus on settlements, iron tools, memorial stelae)	Mesolithic to Historic	Primarily chronological overlap in later phases (Iron Age motifs); Art serves as a historical and memorial narrative.	Emphasis on defense/conflict; Use of specific pigments (red ochre); Focus on fertility and communal memory.
South India (e.g., Anjunad Valley)	Dense (cairn-circles, dolmens, cists, BRW)	Iron Age- Early Historic	Direct physical proximity (art sites located near burials); Pigments (ochre/kaolin) found in graves.	Humped bulls, herding, ritual use of pigment associated with mortuary practices.

The analysis suggests that the Megalithic phenomenon should be understood as a widespread complex of technological (iron) and ideological traits (organized defense, fixed capital, ancestor veneration). The Chitrakoot rock art, particularly in its later phases, is fundamentally the visual chronicle of these Iron Age traits in the Vindhyan uplands.

## VI. Ancient Agricultural Values: Interpreting the Economy through Motifs and Symbols

The rock paintings spanning the Chalcolithic and Iron Age provide exceptional insights into the ideological foundations and core values of societies transitioning to settled, agricultural, and pastoral economies. These values centered on the successful management of biological resources (human and animal) and the establishment of stable social structures.

### a. The Primacy of Fertility and Reproductive Success

For early settled communities, human and animal labour constituted the main economic asset necessary for cultivation, herding, and defense.<sup>22</sup> Given the endemic challenges of high mortality rates and stillbirths prevalent thousands of years ago, reproductive success was a paramount concern.<sup>23</sup> This existential need is visually translated in the rock art through fertility cult imagery. Depictions often include abstract symbols such as vulva signs, rings, circles, triangles, and cup marks.<sup>24</sup> Critically, there are instances of narrative representations focusing on pregnancy and delivery (in both human and animal subjects).<sup>25</sup> The presence of figures such as a pregnant deer moves beyond simple naturalism; it becomes a ritualistic affirmation of biological continuity and guaranteed economic abundance, reinforcing the societal priority placed on procreation as the engine of communal survival.

### b. Visualization of Pastoral and Agrarian Labor

The thematic shift away from hunting to herding reflects the foundational agricultural values of the time. The ubiquitous portrayal of domesticated cattle in large herds (Chalcolithic phase) confirms that the primary form of non-perishable economic wealth was tied to livestock management.<sup>26</sup> The ability to sustain large bovine herds was a key indicator of societal success, offering reliable food, secondary products, and animal power for transport and labour. Although explicit scenes of ploughing with cattle are rare in the core Vindhyan corpus (though documented elsewhere), the archaeological correlation with the surrounding Megalithic/Iron Age culture confirms that these societies included specialized farmers utilizing iron sickles and plough coulters for staples like rice and ragi.<sup>27</sup> The art documents the *effects* of this agrarian revolution—the need for permanent settlements, as evidenced by designs resembling thatched huts, and the necessary defence of fixed capital. The rock art functioned as a visual guide and didactic tool, transmitting critical knowledge about successful strategies for livestock management, resource organization, and conflict resolution, vital for navigating the complexities of the new economic structure.

### c. Communalism, Ritual Cycles, and Holistic Values

The later rock art of the Vindhyas vividly illustrates the required social structure to support the new economy. Scenes depicting communal gatherings and dance likely reflect shared rituals tied to seasonal cycles—such as harvest festivals or ceremonies related to pastoral migration.<sup>28</sup> These communal artistic endeavours and ritual performances were essential for fostering the social cohesion necessary for shared labour, be it constructing enclosures, maintaining irrigation, or organizing collective defence.

The juxtaposition of fertility motifs, domesticated animals, and elaborate weapons/warfare depictions reveals a cohesive economic strategy. Fertility ensures the necessary labor (human and animal) for production, and organized defense protects that fixed capital from external threats.<sup>29</sup> The ancient agricultural values are therefore holistic, integrating biological success, social organization, and martial capability into a single worldview.

The continued appearance of motifs such as handprints, geometric symbols, and cattle imagery links the ancient rock art to the living tribal traditions of Central India (e.g., Kol, Bhil tribes).<sup>30</sup> This continuity reinforces the idea that the underlying cultural values regarding prosperity, protection, and the spiritual relationship with the land have persisted across vast chronological boundaries.

The following table summarizes the key motifs interpreted as reflecting agricultural and pastoral values:

#### Motifs and Interpretation of Ancient Agrarian Values in Later Vindhyan Rock Art (Chalcolithic/Iron Age)

Motif Category	Example Motifs	Inferred Agricultural Value
<b>Resource Abundance/Wealth</b>	Domesticated Cattle/Humped Bulls, large herds, carts	Economic stability, pastoral wealth, and reliable food supply; Integration of animal power into transport/labor.
<b>Procreation/Fertility</b>	Pregnant animals, Vulva/Ring symbols, abstract triangles, dance scenes	Success in reproduction (human and livestock); Ensuring labor force growth to sustain communal agriculture.
<b>Defense/Resource Protection</b>	Horse-riders, Swords/Shields, Battle scenes, Elephants	High value of fixed assets (land, cattle); Need for specialized warrior classes and defense against competing groups.
<b>Social Cohesion/Ritual</b>	Communal Dance scenes, Handprints, Geometric/Abstract symbols	Collective organization, seasonal rituals (harvest), shared identity, and continuity of traditional beliefs and historical memory.

## Conclusion:

Chitrakoot is established as a central node in the Northern Vindhyan archaeological landscape, offering a uniquely continuous visual record of human adaptation. The region's rock art provides an invaluable chronological stratigraphy, tracing the cultural evolution from the intense Mesolithic hunting economy, through the adoption of Chalcolithic pastoralism and contact with Malwa agriculturalists, into the complex, militarized structure of the Iron Age and Early Historic periods.

The rock paintings of Chitrakoot are intimately connected with the Megalithic culture not through monumental architectural forms, but through a shared ideological complex. The art visually documents the essential traits of the Iron Age economy: specialized labor, reliance on fixed capital (livestock and land), and organized group identity supported by martial defense. This function contrasts with the architectural megaliths of South India, yet both forms served the critical purpose of documenting and perpetuating ancestral memory and group claims in a period of intense socio-economic transformation.

The paintings explicitly articulate the core ancient agricultural values. These values prioritized biological success (fertility cults for robust human and animal populations), the accumulation of pastoral wealth (represented by cattle herds), and the development of sophisticated social mechanisms (communal rituals and specialized defense forces) necessary to manage and protect resources in a competitive world. Chitrakoot's rock art, therefore, stands as a critical and exhaustive visual testimony to the profound societal transformation that characterized the shift from mobile foraging to stable, resource-intensive agrarian life in the Indian subcontinent.

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